

Upcoming New Mexico elections will test voter discontent, activism

Written by Viki Harrison Executive Director Common Cause New Mexico
Friday, 20 April 2018 08:26



With thousands of young people on the march, women activated by the “Me Too” Movement, and a new crop of candidates for state elections, this year’s elections could be an indication of our state’s appetite for reforming a system that my organization, Common Cause New Mexico, has often found wanting.

Common Cause is a non-partisan organization which does not endorse candidates, but like all ordinary citizens, we have a vested interest in a functioning democratic system which represents the voices of everyday people. We’ve been focused on controlling the influence of big money and special interests on elections and the decision-making process, guaranteeing access for qualified voters, and holding our representatives to high ethical standards. We think it’s what democracy looks like.

This year we asked some different questions in our annual poll and found a few reasons to be optimistic.

First, the poll, taken by Research and Polling Inc. in January, found that only 24% of the 452 voters sampled felt that New Mexico was on the right track, a much higher level of discontent than in the 2014 elections. It also showed an appetite for reforms never before taken seriously – things like paying legislators (54% support) and lengthening the legislative sessions (65% want to do it). And along with the usual high level of support for things like transparency for PAC, lobbyist and campaign activities, there was something new – 60% of respondents said that they would be more likely to support candidates who push for campaign reforms like these.

That gives us reason to hope. Campaign finance has never been a flashy issue. It’s rarely mentioned in debates. But we think it’s foundational to a functioning democracy. Everyone deserves to have their own voice heard in decisions affecting their families, and to also know who is behind the curtain affecting the outcome.

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With these poll results, we now think the public is listening too.

This month we're shouting our priorities from the rooftops, and circulating our pro-democracy agenda to candidates and political organizations of all stripes. According to polling data (our own and others'), many of these issues have had the overwhelming support of voters for years, but they always have great difficulty crossing the finishing line.

Here's a sampling of what we think a pro-democracy agenda looks like:

On-line and automatic voter registration to allow people to vote easily

Open primaries to allow decline-to-state and independent voters to participate in primaries

An independent, non-partisan ethics commission to make sure elected officials, lobbyists and contractors play by the rules

Maintenance of state campaign contribution limits to stem the tide of big money in state elections

Disclosure of all political contributions and expenditures from lobbyists, PACs and candidates, in accordance with the constitution

Citizen funded elections using small-donor public financing, which matches small citizen contribution with public funds to enable ordinary people to participate meaningfully and curb special interests. And wealthy donors

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Complete disclosure of activities, contributions and expenditures of lobbyists aimed at influencing the policy making process

A two-year waiting period before lawmakers can become lobbyists

An independent, non-partisan redistricting commission to insure competitive, fair elections where every vote counts equally and the outcome is not rigged by maps drawn to maximize partisan or incumbent advantage

Voters need to know whether candidates running for office in New Mexico support these common-sense measures. At Common Cause New Mexico, we consider them buttresses to strengthen the pillars of our democracy – fair and equal representation of qualified voters, honest and accountable public officials, and a transparent government. The only way to find out is to ask them at the next candidate forum, fundraiser or community event.

Complete results of Common Cause New Mexico's 2018 poll can be found at <http://www.commoncause.org/states/new-mexico/research-and-reports/2018-polling.pdf>

Viki Harrison is the Executive Director of Common Cause New Mexico. Common Cause is a nonpartisan grassroots organization dedicated to upholding the core values of American democracy. It works to create open, honest, and accountable government that serves the public interest; promote equal rights, opportunity, and representation for all; and to empower all people to make their voices heard as equals in the political process.

By Viki Harrison

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